Death in Life

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INTRODUCTION

Between those two short lines of the nursery rhyme lies a complex developmental process. Over a lifetime, human beings learn to deal with death through a series of overlapping processes. Children begin by grasping the reality of death, but it is not until midlife that people learn to accept their own mortality. In later life, individuals understand and accept that their life is nearing its end and that death will come soon. These levels of understanding are linked to other processes typical of the developmental stage in which each occurs. This chapter traces the ways in which humans integrate death into their understanding and proposes three overlapping and related processes that occur at different developmental stages. The main focus is on the two later processes, as it is in midlife and later life that adults feel the presence of death more keenly, and this understanding affects their orientation toward life and loss.
DEATH IN CHILDHOOD, ADOLESCENCE AND EARLY ADULTHOOD

Very young children have a difficult time understanding an abstract term such as death. According to Speece and Brent (1996), children master the concept over time, gradually understanding component concepts such as that death is universal, meaning that it is inevitable, inclusive, unpredictable, and irreversible. Children, too, begin to learn that the dead do not function in a corporal way. Yet as they attempt to develop their own spirituality of death, they may believe that the dead continue in other ways such as in memory or in some sort of afterlife (Lifton and Olsen, 1974). Speece and Brent (1996) also assert that part of understanding death entails a greater comprehension of causality. Children move then from more magical thinking about death to realize notions of the reasons why living things die.

Yet, while the older child is aware of death, the concept of death is often not personalized. The child recognizes that he or she, like all living creatures, will die, but that thought is pushed into a very abstract future. The issue of the inevitability of one’s own death is simply not cogent unless provoked by a life-threatening illness (Bluebond-Langner, 1978). The cognitive comprehension of death does not necessarily entail the recognition of personal mortality. There is a great gap between the statements “people die” and “I, too, will die.”

While this recognition of death may begin in childhood, developmental issues that arise in adolescence tend to make the awareness of one’s own mortality more of a cogent concern. The adolescent is struggling with a number of issues that intersect with death—primarily, the drive to create an individual identity. As the adolescent struggles with this individuality, there can be a growing awareness that death, nonexistence, represents a great threat to that emerging identity. In some cases, this may lead to extensive denial of death or challenges to death that are evident in dangerous behaviors.

The threat of death can also be accentuated by the stress and isolation that the adolescent experiences. In this time of critical reflection and reassessment, previous sources of support, such as religion,
may no longer be as viable. With an emerging sense of individuality may come a growing sense of aloneness. "There is no one like me" easily becomes "there is no one who fully understands me." There may be a sense of separation from parents. There may be mourning for the loss of childhood. As Alexander, Colby, and Alderstein (1957) assert, death may become a more significant issue at times in which one's identity experiences psychological and social stress. Their projective testing techniques indicated that death is affect-laden for adolescents, albeit on a less conscious level.

While the awareness of mortality may begin to sharpen during this developmental stage, adolescents are well able to defend against it. One of the major defenses is, simply, that adolescents are very present-oriented. This is clear in Kastenbaum's (1965) work on the meaning of death in adolescence. Kastenbaum found that most of his adolescent participants had little sense of finality. In their present-oriented world, death was simply not a major issue. Only a small minority of his participants thought about death. These results were similar to a much earlier study that found college students relatively unconcerned about death (Middleton, 1936). Similarly, Newman (1987), in a review of literature, found that while adolescents in that era were fearful of nuclear war and environment devastation, they had comparatively few concerns about personal death. Perhaps there is an illusion of invulnerability, emerging from this intense present-orientation, that contributes to that earlier mentioned tendency to challenge death. In summary then, while adolescents may begin to recognize their own mortality, albeit perhaps subconsciously, their intense present orientation makes it unlikely that this awareness will become a significant issue.

Awareness of mortality can also be ignored in early adulthood. Erikson (1963) for example, sees young adults consumed by a quest to consolidate identity and establish intimacy. The young adult is concerned with the external world—establishing intimate relationships, beginning a family, starting a career. Yet there are some dimensions of early adult life that do, at least in a remote way, raise issues of mortality. As young adults begin to accumulate assets and responsibili-
ties, such as for a significant other, spouse, or child, they may begin to execute documents such as wills, advance directives, or guardianships. Such documents involve an implicit recognition of mortality. Similarly, as adults plan to raise children, they consider the spiritual traditions, values, and beliefs that they wish to share with their offspring. This, too, may engender thoughts about the afterlife, again leading to a consideration or mortality. But again, this thinking is remote and episodic.

**MIDLIFE: DEVELOPING THE AWARENESS OF MORTALITY**

The thesis of this chapter, developed from earlier work (Doka, 1988, 1995), is that it is in midlife that individuals develop an *awareness of mortality* and that in later life they develop an *awareness of finitude* (Marshall, 1980). While this generally occurs, either awareness can occur earlier, especially if the context is marked by internal or external events such as war or catastrophe, developmentally unexpected losses, early onset of chronic illnesses, or an expectation of a more limited life span. Nonetheless, these processes typically occur in midlife and later life.

While some psychoanalytic theorists such as Freud (1925) or Weisman (1972) assert that humans can never imagine their own deaths, other development theorists have implied that the full awareness of mortality begins to emerge in middle adulthood. This awareness of mortality is the recognition that one will die, although not necessarily in the immediate future. It is the understanding that there is an end to one’s time that is inexorably drawing closer. To many theorists, it is in middle adulthood that the concerns become more internal and introspective. Erikson (1963) characterizes this stage of life as “generativity vs. stagnation.” Implicit in his discussion of this stage is an increasing awareness of personal mortality that creates a desire in these adults to “pass on the torch” to a newer generation. The middle adult wants to develop a legacy, a contribution that can be left to establish the significance of his or her life. That desire is fueled by the increasing understanding that there are limits to one’s time. Hence, if the person does not use this time productively, there might not be future opportu-
nity. Other theories have seen middle adulthood similarly. For example, although the universality of a midlife crisis is debated, its adherents claim it is the knowledge of future death that provides the impetus for a major reevaluation of one's life (Brim, 1976; Jacques, 1965; Levinson, 1978; Lifton, 1975; Neugarten, 1972; Zacks, 1980). Research by Rothstein (1967) supports the view that death becomes more of a cogent concern in midlife. He interviewed 36 adults, aged 30 to 48. His older respondents (43 to 48) tended to personalize death more than those in the 30 to 42 age groups. Death becomes a more salient issue in midlife, responded to first by shock and then resigned accommodation.

There are a number of conditions and circumstances that contribute to the development of an awareness of mortality in middle adulthood. First, as adults reach their 30s, 40s, and 50s, they begin to experience varied physiological and sensory declines. The recognition of these declines reminds one of the inevitability of aging and eventual death:

In the late 30s and early 40s a man falls well below his earlier peak levels of functioning. He cannot run as fast, live as much, do with as little sleep as before. His vision and hearing are less acute, he remembers less well. And he finds it harder to learn masses of specific information (Levinson, 1978, p. 213).

Women experience menopause, and both men and women may experience a gradual diminution of sexual prowess. This, too, is a vivid reminder of loss and aging, and, as Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1976) suggest, there may be an inverse relationship between reproductive capability and a sense of terminus.

Second, there is a dramatic increase in the mortality rate, particularly for those in their 40s. For example, the male mortality rate for men 45 to 64 is six times that for those 25 to 44 (Tamir, 1982). As adults enter midlife, then, they begin to regularly experience the death of peers from causes other than accident or suicide. Stephenson (1985) notes that when a person in midlife experiences loss, there may be both reactive and existential grief. Reactive grief is a response to the loss of a
person. Existential grief is the recognition, often prompted by the loss of another, that one will suffer and die. Thus, the loss of others in one’s cohort is a vivid reminder of personal vulnerability.

A third factor is that adults in midlife begin to see their own parents and their parents’ cohort aging and dying. The previously omnipotent parent increasingly is seen as weak and vulnerable. To Blenkner (1965) this is a significant factor in adult development. Not only does it create a new relationship with an aging parent, it reinforces for midlife adults their own aging and death. This is further underlined by the fact that their children are at the point of establishing their own families and careers, reinforcing the reality that their own cohort is advancing in age toward distant but inescapable death. As Moss and Moss (1983) state:

The loss of a parent represents the removal of a buffer against death. As long as the parent was alive the child could feel protected, since the parent by the rational order of things was expected to die first. Without this buffer there is a strong reminder that the child is now the older generation and cannot easily deny his or her own mortality. (p. 73)

Other factors in midlife may also increase awareness of mortality. Grandparenthood, which is a midlife experience, is often interpreted by grandparents as a mark of age. Preparing for retirement, even though it is still some time away, reiterates the passage of time. Approaching what is perceived as a significant birthday (40, 50, etc.) may also be considered a mark of age. Finally, a serious operation, a health crisis, or the onset of chronic illness may increase the awareness of mortality.

It would seem, then, that given the differing conditions and circumstances that lead to the awareness of mortality in adults, this awareness can develop gradually, overtime, as a person slowly becomes aware of physical declines and personal vulnerability. In other cases, this awareness may be sudden insight in response to a crisis.

No matter how the awareness of mortality develops, it has certain implications for adult life. First, the middle aged person’s sense of time is modified. The child primarily looks toward the future. Time is
measured from birth. The older person may be more oriented toward the past. The "time remaining" is considered both cogent and short. Neugarten (1972) theorizes that this restructuring of time occurs in middle age where the increasing awareness of finiteness leads middle agers to think both in terms of time since birth as well as time left to live.

As the recognition of time shifts, there are profound implications for the sense of self. As stated earlier, the recognition of personal mortality leads to a reassessment of identity. Adults in middle age must consider what they have been, what they wished to be, and what they still can become. In essence, they begin to consider what they could leave behind. To use Lifton and Olson's (1974) terminology, there is a search for symbolic immortality in creations or progeny that will remain. As Erikson (1963) states, generality becomes a central issue.

Generativity...is primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation...and, indeed, the concept "generativity" is meant to include such more popular synonyms as productivity and creativity. (p. 267)

Levinson (1978) describes a similar concern:

Knowing that his own death is not far off, he is eager to affirm life for himself and for generations to come. He wants to be more creative. The creative impulse is not merely to "make" something. It is to bring something into being. To give birth, to generate life. (p. 222)

This illustrates that there is not a morbid preoccupation with death in midlife. The middle aged person recognizes that he or she is in the prime of life with death likely to be decades away. The recognition that death will come can create a desire to see that the remaining years are well spent.

Awareness of mortality can be life enhancing. Neugarten (1968), for example, sees the awareness of mortality as a prod that adds zest to life.
Koestenbaum (1971) sees the knowledge of finiteness as contributing to a renewed sense of vitality. In understanding one’s personal mortality, there is greater appreciation for the tedious and common tasks that contribute to the completion of goals. Life takes on a new perspective. Zacks (1980), too, feels that the recognition of limited time creates an intensified search for self-actualization. In addition, these processes may make the person more inner directed. Faced with finiteness, the constraints placed by others may seem less significant.

While such reassessment represents a symbolic, long-term preparation for death, other preparation may take more mundane forms. Those in middle age become concerned with the practical aspects of death such as obtaining insurance, providing for trusts, and writing their will. This preparation continues to increase with age (Kalish and Reynolds, 1976).

While the awareness of mortality may in some ways enhance the quality of life or ease the impact of a future death, there can be negative aspects as well. The awareness of mortality strikes at a time when that recognition can be quite problematic. Family responsibilities and financial constraints may be at their peak. Career commitments may be at their apex. Life goals, even if reassessed, are likely to be incomplete. Under such conditions, the knowledge that one will die is likely to provoke great anxiety. It could be expected then that death anxiety would be at its highest in midlife as the adult becomes increasingly cognizant of the paradox of both heightened responsibility and limited time.

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to review the extensive and contradictory research on death anxiety, there is some support for the idea that death anxiety peaks in midlife (Doka, 1988, 1995; Neimeyer, 1994). Nonetheless, the relationship between age and death anxiety is complex and may have different explanations. It may be a statistical artifact, simply reflecting the greater religiosity of older cohorts that seems to reduce death anxiety, or it may reflect other reasons, as well (Kalish and Reynolds, 1976). Perhaps the aged, suffering varied losses, disabilities, and pain, see life as having less value, or
perhaps older persons' believe that they have lived their lives and recognize that now, according to the natural state of the world, they are approaching death. Perhaps, as Kalish and Reynolds suggest, older persons may be anticipating and preparing for their own eventual death, which may reduce their overt anxiety.

Middle-aged persons, though, have different concerns. They become aware of death when their commitments and opportunities are extensive. Death becomes the haunting specter that may yet rob them of the opportunity to achieve their goals and enjoy the fruits of their efforts. Death perhaps is the greater terror, stalking midlife, threatening goals and plans, heralding incompleteness, and even, for some suggesting the futility and meaningless of existence.

Perhaps, then, this crisis creates a process of concession to eventual death. This process may entail a reevaluation of life, renewed commitment to the achievement of critical goals, increased focus on health so as to forestall death, and attempts to reduce the uncertainty and impact of death by prudent preparation. There may also be increased concern with spirituality. While the issues of spirituality, religiosity, age, and death anxiety are too complex to consider here, it is not inconsistent with developmental approaches to posit that the recognition of eventual death encourages spirituality, if not religiosity, in older cohorts. Perhaps this crisis forces midlife adults to confront life in order to find meaning so as to avoid the terror of death. In addition, perhaps, the longer one lives side by side with now-recognized death, the less terrifying it becomes.

To summarize, the awareness of mortality may be the most significant psychological event in middle life. As described earlier in the chapter, the awareness of mortality has two major implications for adult life. First, it changes the nature of time. Aware of their mortality, midlife adults constantly struggle with the issue of time remaining. They now see both the finish and starting lines of their life. Their sense of future is now bounded.

This leads to a second implication. An awareness of mortality leads to a quest for finding meaning in one's life. Aware of limited time, even
if it is measured in decades, a midlife adult becomes deeply concerned that his or her life has meaning.

Midlife adults reassess where they are in their lives. If they are generally content with their past and present life and content with the direction life seems to be taking, this concern with meaning may not be overly troublesome. They need simply to reaffirm the meaning they have already found and perhaps commit to current goals. Perhaps such persons may reprioritize their goals and themes, for example, deciding to spend more time with family.

Others may not face the future with such equanimity. If a midlife adult’s past is problematic, he or she may be concerned about beginning to gain closure, perhaps expressed by entering therapy or confronting past issues and demons. If an individual views the present as troubling or the future as unresolved, awareness of mortality can engender a sense of panic or terror. Perceiving the boundaries of life, the individual becomes aware of the fact that constructing and living a meaningful life may no longer be possible. There may simply not be enough time to find meaning in a heretofore meaningless existence. Perhaps the midlife crisis is a manifestation of this frantic concern to achieve meaning by rearranging one’s present and future.

Not everyone, of course, struggles with the issue of meaning. To some, the awareness of mortality is simply too terrifying to confront or the quest to find meaning too difficult to pursue. Such persons may select varied coping mechanisms, such as escapist or denial strategies to avoid confronting one’s mortality. In discussing the fear of nuclear holocaust, Lifton and Olson (1974) described a process of psychic numbing, where the threat is so terrible yet pervasive that one becomes psychologically incapable of considering it. Perhaps, for some, the threat of death holds so much terror that it can never truly be faced.

The awareness of mortality becomes the critical defining moment in adult life. It forces individuals to find or to construct significance and meaning in life or to surrender to terror.
DEATH IN LATER LIFE

In time, the recognition of mortality, that is, an understanding that one will eventually die, leads to an awareness of finitude (Marshall, 1980). Awareness of finitude in older persons does not mean that they expect to die immediately but rather that they realize they are in the end part of life. Hence they are reluctant to perceive or plan too far in to the future. Time is now primarily viewed through the past (Neugarten, 1972).

Consistent with the work of Erikson (1963) and Butler (1963), Marshall (1980) sees the awareness of finitude as prompting a life review process. Here, the individual reviews past life to affirm that his or her life had meaning and value. To Erikson (1963), a successful life review means that the older person can view life with a sense of ego integrity, that is, a sense that he or she has lived a worthwhile life, or as Marshall (1980) states, one’s life is a “good story.” If the life review is not successful, an individual may perceive that his or her life has been wasted, yielding to a sense of despair.

Like the awareness of mortality, precisely when the awareness of finitude develops is inexact. Certainly, events such as nursing home institutionalization, illness, or frailty can accelerate it. Then, too, a chronic illness or condition that leads to an expectation of a shortened life span or an early and imminent death can create an awareness of finitude and subsequent life review even in the very young (Bluebond-Langner, 1978).

In addition to prompting life review, the awareness of finitude often engenders a concern with a good, appropriate death (Marshall, 1980; Weisman, 1972). This means that the person wants to die in a way consistent with his or her values, wishes, or earlier life. On a practical level, that might mean that older persons are intent on instructing their adult children about their estate, advance directives, even their wishes about funerals and other rituals. Yet the discussion suggests that this may create a paradoxical situation: older adults with an awareness of finitude may need to address the issues of their death, but their middle-aged children struggling with their own awareness of mortality
may be deeply threatened by their parents’ death and hence avoid such discussion. That same paradox may trouble adult children’s end-of-life decision making as they confront the death of an older parent.

CONCLUSION

There may be, then, three overlapping and related processes that occur as humans struggle with death. In the first process, conceptualization, the child must cognitively comprehend the reality of death. The second process, beginning in late childhood and culminating in middle adulthood, is one of personalization. In this process, the person becomes aware of his or her own individual mortality. In the final process, the older adult concedes that death will occur soon, that life is near end.

The awareness of mortality and finitude may represent a significant process in adult life. While such awareness of mortality increases anxiety at first, as individuals learn to live with the specter of death in midlife, death becomes less foreboding as they near it. As Frank Herbert (1977) states in his epic novel *Children of Dune*:

To suspect your own mortality is the beginning of terror; to learn irrefutably that you are mortal is to know the end of terror. (44, pp.133–134)
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